Bp. Williamson's Mentevacantist Error

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Ratzinger a heretic? No, just a sick mind.

The Most Rev. Richard N. Williamson, Rector of the Society of St. Pius X's seminary in La Reja, Argentina, is, by general agreement, a colorful character.

In an August 2006 interview with Stephen Heiner, later published in the SSPX publication *The Angelus*, His Excellency responded to questions on a broad range of subjects, and did not fail to live up to his reputation.

One topic Bp. Williamson discussed at some length was sedevacantism. Now in 1980, when I still was a member of the Society of St. Pius X and he was still a simple priest, we had a number of very lively discussions about this.

Fr. Williamson explained to me his theory about why John Paul II could *not* be a true heretic, and hence could *not* automatically lose the papal office, as sedevacantists like myself contend. "Half of John Paul II's brain is liberal, and half is Catholic," he told me, "So he doesn't really *know* that what he says is not Catholic!"

It struck me as a perfectly loony idea then — a modernist is *not responsible* for heresy *because* he's a modernist? I christened it "mentevacantism," from the Latin words for "vacant mind."

In his recent interview, Bp. Williamson is still promoting mentevacantism as an answer to sedevacantism. His current explanation of the theory goes something like this:

Benedict XVI has a "sick" modern mind. For this reason, Benedict is *unaware* of his heresy. Since there is no church authority to *make* him aware of it, Benedict cannot make a *true* choice between dogma and heresy. Without this true choice, Benedict is not a real heretic, and so he remains a true pope.

Below I will present Bp. Williamson's mentevacantist thesis and then offer my own analysis of it.

I. Sick Mind, No Heresy

The argument that Bp. Williamson seeks to refute is that of sedevacantists like myself. The general theological principle behind sedevacantism is found in many standard manuals of dogmatic theology and canon law. It can be expressed this way:

Divine law excludes a public heretic from being validly elected pope and obtaining papal authority. A pope who would become a heretic, moreover, would by **divine law** automatically fall from office without the need for any declaratory sentence. And in either case, it is the **sin** of heresy that renders a heretic incapable of becoming or remaining pope.

Bp. Williamson understands this principle and indeed articulated it very clearly in the interview with Mr. Heiner:

"To be such a heretic as to so put oneself out of the Catholic Church that one cannot possibly any longer be its head, i.e. Pope, one must know that one is denying what one knows to be a defined dogma of the Catholic Faith, because such a denial amounts to deliberate apostasy. To become, or to continue being, a Catholic, is a choice. If I know what a Catholic must believe in order to be Catholic, and if I refuse to believe it, then I am choosing to be a heretic instead of a Catholic, and I put myself outside the Church."

Bp. Williamson, however, seeks to defeat the sedevacantist argument by demonstrating that this principle cannot be applied to Benedict XVI, because:

"Modern minds are very sick, as minds, and Benedict XVI has a modern mind… The sickness consists in believing that there is no fixed, objective truth which absolutely excludes error.… The 'truth' is what my mind makes it. But the mind is made for objective truth like lungs are made for oxygen, so just as lungs without external oxygen are sick to death, so a mind with no external truth is sick to death.…

"Benedict XVI believes that Catholic 'truth' can evolve. For instance, very serious statements of Catholic truth that cannot change, like the *Syllabus* or *Pascendi*,… He cannot see that this anti-modern Catholic doctrine of his predecessors is of such a nature that it cannot change, and not even as Pope can he change it. His poor mind, however gifted, is sick with that modern — especially German — philosophy… How could he not think he was being 'normal'?

Modern philosophy, in other words, empties the mind of the capacity to recognize truth — and absolves the individual of responsibility.

From these statements, Bp. Williamson intends readers to conclude that a generalized "sickness of the modern mind" completely removes culpability for heresy and obliterates its effects for a heretical pope. Welcome to mentevacantism!

Bp. Williamson is aware, however, the more perceptive among his readers would dismiss this excuse as merely a more refined version of one of the tenets of modern liberalism — evil is *really* produced by a sick society, and therefore individuals are not personally responsible for actions.

To cut this objection off at the pass — pardon the cowboy analogy — Bp. Williamson then summons up "the old days." The difference between then and now, he says, is that a modernist such a Ratzinger would be summoned before the Holy Office, and told to retract, or else:

"And the neo-modernist would have had to choose, having been made aware, *by Church authority*, of his heresy.… But this last resort is unavailable to today´s churchmen, because they **<u>are</u>** the authority!"

No warnings, no heresy!

Now here, we pause to explain what comes next: the Williamson I'm-Not-Saying-That trick. He has snookered questioners with it countless times in the past. Here's how it works:

Bp. Williamson is carrying on at great length about some topic, and he has grandly laid down some false general principle (or a madcap analogy) and applied it to a particular case. A questioner — a seminarian, an interviewer, a layman in the parish hall — then invites him to Draw The Logical Conclusion For All Cases, M'Lud.

And this is just what Mr. Heiner does by asking the bishop: "Then churchmen such as Benedict XVI are completely *innocent* of what they are doing?"

And sure enough, Bp. Williamson immediately answers: "I did not say that."

Of *course* you didn't, Your Excellency! Because you would then articulate the logical but *obviously* idiotic conclusion — that heretics are *not* culpable for their heresies. This, in turn, would demonstrate to all but the dullest trad that your general principle was complete *hogwash*.

Having pulled The Trick on Mr. Heiner, Bp. Williamson then wheels away from the obvious idiocy and instantly switches another topic: whether

Benedict XVI is “refusing graces” given to him because he is an authority in God’s Church.

(This is a circular argument, by the way: Benedict XVI can’t lose his authority, because he possesses authority.)

Thus Bp. Williamson’s exposition of the mentevacantist thesis: A heretic (Ratzinger) remains pope because a sick mind (the result of bad modern philosophy) prevented him from noticing his heresy, and no one was around to warn him.

Ratzinger’s not a *heretic*. He just suffers from theological attention deficit disorder…

It’s vintage Bp. Williamson: Glib, self-assured, balanced-sounding, slightly pop, delivered (no doubt) with a cut-glass English accent — and jam-packed with false principles contradicted by the pre-Vatican II manuals of dogmatic theology and canon law.

II. Mentevacantism Refuted

A. The “Sickness” Proves Ratzinger is a Heretic.

Bp. Williamson describes the symptoms of Ratzinger’s “sickness” with expressions like the following:

“The sickness consists in believing that there is no fixed, objective truth which absolutely excludes error.… Benedict XVI believes that Catholic ‘truth’ can evolve.… He cannot see that this anti-modern Catholic doctrine of his predecessors is of such a nature that it cannot change,”

This language, however, far from *excusing* Ratzinger, actually *proves* that he has lost the faith — and is thus no true pope.

This is clear simply from the nature of faith itself. It’s a supernatural virtue that gives you absolute **certitude** about what you believe in — Christ is God, the Catholic Church is the one true Church, sacraments give grace, etc.

The “sickness” Bp. Williamson attributes to Ratzinger, on the other hand, **excludes**such certitude — “there is no fixed, objective truth” to believe in, because truth evolves. So in Ratzinger’s system one of the necessary

elements ("properties") of faith is **missing.** Taking "certitude" out of faith is like removing hydrogen from water: the water ceases to be.

(And in Bp. Williamson's honor, we'll throw in the appropriate scholastic axiom here: *Negatio proprietatum est deletio naturae* — Deny the properties of something and you destroy its nature.)

So, the virtue of faith (truth unchanged = certitude) and the Ratzinger disease (truth evolving = no certitude) are a sure sign that Ratzinger lacks the faith.

And for a pope, what are the consequences? "He would automatically lose pontifical power," Cardinal Billot explains, "because, having become an unbeliever [*factus infidelis*], he put himself outside of the Church by his own will." (*De Ecclesia Christi* [Rome: Gregorian 1927] 1:632)

So the very "sickness" Bp. Williamson would use to *excuse* Ratzinger from heresy instead *convicts* Ratzinger of it — and strips him of the papacy. Put bluntly:

- No certitude = no faith.
- No faith = no Catholic.
- No Catholic = no pope.

B. Ratzinger Condemned by His Oath.

Bp. Williamson argues that Ratzinger is likewise not culpable for his heresy because:

"Benedict XVI believes that Catholic 'truth' can evolve. For instance, very serious statements of Catholic truth that cannot change, like the *Syllabus* or *Pascendi*, he calls merely 'substantial anchorages' in Church doctrine, meaning that the Church could anchor there, and usefully anchored there for a while, but in modern times the Church needs new 'substantial anchorages' in doctrine."

Here, by attributing to Ratzinger an explicit belief in dogmatic evolution, Bp. Williamson unwittingly drives another nail into the heretic's coffin.

Pope St. Pius X's *Pascendi* and *Syllabus* **condemn**the evolution of dogma as a modernist **heresy**. And Ratzinger, before he was ordained subdeacon, swore on the Gospels the Anti-Modernist Oath to reject and condemn this error.

By taking this oath, seminarian Ratzinger publicly affirmed that he knew the rule of faith. He thus became culpable for the sin of heresy committed against it:

"From the moment that one sufficiently knows the existence of the rule of the faith in the Church and that, on any point whatsoever, for whatever motive and in whatever form, one refuses to submit to it," says the canonist Michel, "**formal heresy is complete**." ("Héresie, Héretique," *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* [Paris: Letouzey 1909-] 6:2222)

So Ratzinger possessed sufficient knowledge.

Once again, Ratzinger's "sickness" — belief in the evolution of dogma — *condemns* him as a heretic rather that *excuses* him.

C. A Crazy Pope Loses Office

Bp. Williamson's absurd equation of bad philosophy with a sort of mental illness paints a picture of Ratzinger utterly divorced from reality:

"His poor mind, however gifted, is sick with that modern – especially German – philosophy which unhooks the mind from its object, like cutting off lungs from oxygen."

But this particular attempt to exculpate Ratzinger for heresy leads to *another* problem Bp. Williamson did not foresee: "Crazy" cuts both ways.

"Barred as incapable of being validly elected [pope] are… those afflicted with habitual insanity.… By falling into certain and perpetual insanity, the Roman Pontiff would automatically lose pontifical jurisdiction… For the certain and perpetual insanity of the Roman Pontiff (not doubtful or temporary) is the equivalent to death, and through death the Roman Pontiff certainly loses his jurisdication." (Wernz-Vidal, *Jus Canonicum* [Rome: Gregorian 1938] 2:415, 2:452)

So if Ratzinger is too crazy to be a heretic, he is also too crazy to be a real pope.

D. Confusing "Sin" with "Crime"

Bp. Williamson implies that professing heresy has no consequences for a heretic — and particularly for a heretical pope — unless and until the heretic is somehow *warned*.

"In the good old days," Bp. Williamson says, "a Catholic Pope put very intelligent and orthodox theologians in the Holy Office, formerly known as

the Inquisition, and these would interrogate a neo-modernist thus: 'You have written that *Pascendi* is only a ´substantial anchorage´. This amounts to heresy. Either you retract, or the Pope has authority to excommunicate you. Kindly choose."

This statement, however, demonstrates that Bp. Williamson has confused the distinction that canonists make between two aspects of heresy:

(1) **Moral** — heresy as a **sin** (*peccatum*) against **divine** law.

(2) **Canonical** — heresy as a **crime** (*delictum*) against **canon** law.

The moral/canonical distinction is easy to grasp by applying it to something we are all a bit more familiar with, abortion. There are two aspects under which we can consider abortion:

(1) *Moral*: Sin against the 5th Commandment that results in the loss of sanctifying grace.

(2) *Canonical*: Crime against canon 2350.1 of the Code of Canon Law that results in automatic excommunication.

In the case of heresy, warnings only come into play for the *canonical crime* of heresy. These are not required as a condition for committing the *sin* of heresy against the divine law.

The canonist Michel draws the clear distinction for us: "**Pertinacity does not of necessity include** long obstinacy by the heretic and **warnings from the Church**. A condition for**the sin**of heresy is one thing; a condition for **the canonical crime** of heresy, punishable by canon laws, is another." ("Héresie," in DTC 6:2222)

It is a pope's public *sin* of heresy in this sense — the offense against *God's* law — that strips him of Christ's authority.

So the warnings that Bp. Williamson envisions are not necessary conditions for concluding that Ratzinger is a true heretic and therefore no true pope.

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At this point, a question naturally occurs: Why in the world does *no* one in the Society, especially a reputed brain like Bp. Williamson, ever seem to recognize such seemingly fundamental errors and correct them?

The reason is the Society of St. Pius X's party-line mentality. When you join the organization, you are expected to honor the received notions (*données*) formulated during The Era of the Archbishop.

So, as I have pointed out elsewhere, a member of the Society must reverently repeat the "positions of the Society" on its nature (society of common life without vows), its suppression (invalid), the New Mass (evil, but illegally promulgated), Vatican II (not binding), resisting a true pope (justified by theologians, the pope is like a "bad dad"), sedevacantism ("schismatic," non-Catholic), Abp. Lefebvre's excommunication ("Rome says No!"), etc.

All theological research and writing is useful and encouraged only insofar as it confirms the party line on each of these points. Independent thought, or loyalty to some principle above the Society (in dogma, canon law, etc.) is proof of "un mauvais ésprit" (a bad spirit) and grounds for the ticket to Mumbai.

So, as a colleague and former SSPX member pointed out in 1984, the only people who survive long-term in SSPX are those who do not think.

What the Society treats as *particularly* toxic is standard ecclesiology — those areas of Catholic dogmatic theology that explain the nature of the Church, the authority of the pope, and the need to be visibly united to both. SSPX seminarians are taught about these topics, I have been told by SSPX members, from "notes" formulated by SSPX seminary professors in Europe, rather than from the pre-Vatican II manuals of dogmatic theology. Too hot to handle, no doubt.

Seen in this light, the absurd argument Bp. Williamson proposes to excuse Ratzinger's heresy and thus avoid the inevitable consequences thereof — a sick mind — fits in perfectly. Loyalty to the party line above all!

So when Bp. Williamson concluded his interview by singing a few lines from the musical *Oklahoma* — "There is wisdom in opera and even in musicals!" he says — another song came to mind, this one from Gilbert and Sullivan's *HMS Pinafore*. Perhaps when he's in a singing mood, His Excellency should try a few bars from the song sung by Sir Joseph Porter, First Lord of the Admiralty:

"I always voted at my party's call,

"And I never thought of thinking for myself at all.

"(No, he never thought of thinking for himself at all!)

"And I thought so little, they rewarded me,

“By making me the ruler of the Queen’s Na-vee!

Mentevacantism, ahoy!